

WHY GO?

Superlative geological wonders and great hiking trails

WHEN TO GO?

Spring and autumn, to avoid the extremes of winter (daytime max is 4°C on the Grand Canyon's North Rim) and summer (around 40°C in the Canyon)

HIGHLIGHTS

Vast views at Grand Canyon's North and South Rim, walking among the hoodoo pinnacles of Bryce Canyon

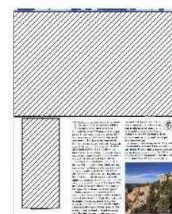
WHAT TO AVOID

Driving after dusk when mule deer and cattle cross unlit roads

The story of the USA canyons began about 70 million years ago when two colliding tectonic plates pushed up the huge Colorado Plateau by 3000 metres. On this high plateau (mostly in southern Utah and northern Arizona), water, wind and weathering carved out ravines such as those at the Canyonlands National Park and Canyon de Chelly. Many Brits arrive to the region via Las Vegas, which offers direct flights from the UK, thus this report focuses on canyons in three national parks easily reached on a round 'Grand Circle' trip from here – Grand Canyon, Zion and Bryce Canyon.

Las Vegas is an oasis of brash decadence in the desert of southeast Nevada, where the neon razzmatazz of the Strip is worth experiencing for at least one night. Vegas has been struggling during the economic downturn so bargains can be found for some hotels, especially on week nights. For example, the striking Luxor hotel was offering Pyramid Deluxe rooms in May 2010 for just US\$65 (£42) earlier this year. For more on Las Vegas, see our January 2006 issue (pg 54).

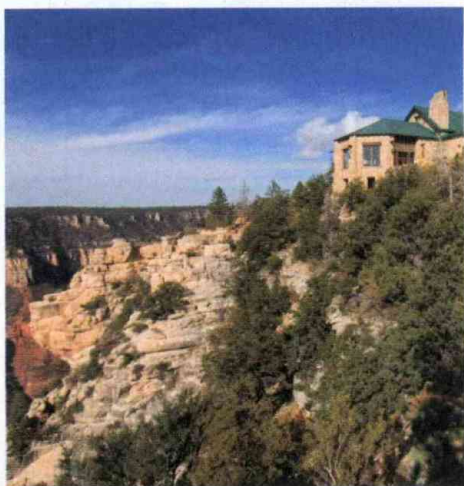
Public transport to the national parks is virtually non-existent, so hire a vehicle or take an escorted tour. Once out of Vegas, driving around is straightforward and generally traffic-free. If you plan to visit all our recommended sights, allow two to three weeks. If you expect to drive to four or more national parks and recreation areas like Glen Canyon, consider an annual



National Parks pass for \$80 (£51) to save on entry costs. Coach operators tend to offer eight-day tours circling the Grand Canyon from Las Vegas or include a couple of the national parks on a longer route through several states as part of a three-week tour.

**SAVE
with an
annual
pass**

If you plan to stay at lodges in the parks, book several months in advance. Here we recommend park lodges. Prices including taxes and fees are for the cheapest double room in May 2010. Reviews of good places to stay outside the parks can be found in the USA Canyons Factfile.



Grand Canyon

You can't argue with the name. This World Heritage wonder is 446km long, up to 29km wide, and up to 1500 metres deep. The Colorado River started gouging out the canyon five to six million years ago, but its multiple, stepped layers of sandstone, limestone and shale date back 1840 million years. The ochre, burgundy and green-grey hues are at their most vivid from an hour after sunrise and just before sunset.

The South Rim

The majority of camera-toting tourists gather at the South Rim, which sports a bewildering choice of walks, viewpoints and attractions. Start at the informative Grand Canyon Visitor Center and pick up the free and invaluable *Guide* newspaper, which lists ranger programmes, trail lengths, and sunrise and sunset times.

**FREE
guide
available**

Heading east, good sunset spots include Grandview Point – one of the better places to see the distant, snaking Colorado – and the Desert View Watchtower. Most people gather at Grand Canyon Village for views over Bright Angel Canyon and the pyramid-like Isis Temple – great from the rear of the lookout studio. Usually, the only way to go west from here is on the free shuttles. Worthy stops include the sheer walls of The Abyss, and Pima Point for views of river rapids. Allow two full days to explore the area.

Recommended walks

Stroll along at least one section of the rim, such as the easy 1km jaunt between Mather and Yavapai Points. To fully appreciate the canyon's grandeur, climb down inside it. Although the well-kept South Kaibab Trail leads to the river (10km one way), we went as far as Cedar Ridge on the fairly steep, red sand path. The payoff is great views of Inca temple-like rock buttes and pines clinging to the canyon walls.

Only the very fit should try to hike all the way to the river and back in a day, and when descending into the canyon, allow twice as long to return.

The North Rim

The North and South Rims are only 16km apart, and the hardcore can hike between the two with an overnight stay near the river, otherwise it's a 350km drive. The higher, colder North Rim is less crowded, despite great trails and views.

A fairly easy amble from the visitor centre to Bright Angel Point – a promontory jutting out over two side canyons – provides magnificent views over venerable rocks with names like Brahma Temple. Take the 45-minute forest drive to Cape Royal for a panoramic view over the chasm.

Grand Canyon West

The Skywalk glass bridge – opened in 2007 – is 400m from the South Rim on land owned by the Hualapai people. The horseshoe-shaped

platform juts 21 metres out from the cliff, so you'll experience the sensation of seeing nothing but 1200 metres of air between you and the canyon floor. Adult \$30 (£19), cameras not allowed. Sleep at the Hualapai Ranch, a mock Wild West town, and you can step onto the Skywalk before the daytrippers swarm in by bus or plane from Vegas.

The canyon scenes are far more spectacular at the North or South Rim, but Grand Canyon West is the only place where helicopters can swoop into the canyon. Take a 10-minute flight to the river and appreciate the sheer cliffs during a boat ride.

**GO
EARLY
to miss the
crowds**

Recommended places to stay

■ Bright Angel Lodge, South Rim

☎ 001 303 297 2757

🌐 www.grandcanyonlodges.com

A bustling, central hotel right on the rim, with rooms to suit most budgets. **\$96 (£61)**

■ Grand Canyon Lodge, North Rim

☎ 001 480 337 1320

🌐 www.grandcanyonforever.com

Book early to stay at this rustic, historic gem with superb canyon views from the lounge. **\$120 (£78)**

MAIN PICTURE One of the many stunning South Rim views INSET Stone Creek, deep in the heart of the Grand Canyon FAR LEFT Grand Canyon Lodge, North Rim

Zion National Park

Some of the world's highest sandstone cliffs – with imposing names such as the Altar of Sacrifice and Great White Throne – tower up from lush Zion Canyon. Unlike Grand and Bryce Canyons, the roads into Zion meet at the bottom of the canyon, where the Virgin River glides past meadows, cottonwoods, aspens and mossy rock overhangs.

The park bans private vehicles from most of the canyon spring to autumn. Frequent shuttles take visitors to various trailheads and good photo stops, such as the giant saw-toothed cliff trio Court of the Patriarchs. Try Canyon Junction for sunset.

Ranger-guided walks are an informative boon, and free leaflets on nature and geology are available at the excellent main visitor centre. Parking spaces fill up well before 10am, so arrive early or park at the Human History Museum (less than 1km away), where an engaging orientation film shows twice an hour.

If you want to escape the crowds and try to spot an elusive mountain lion in Zion, head to Kolob Canyons on the western edge of the Colorado Plateau. An 8km scenic drive

through a juniper-rich valley leads up to a superb view of majestic finger-canyon walls and over immense swathes of parkland.

Recommended walks

Zion Canyon's memorable route up to the imposing Angel's Landing crag rises from the river with stupendous valley views and 21 brick-walled switchbacks – Walter's Wiggles – to Scout Lookout. From this top-notch viewpoint with darting chipmunks and lizards, the final sky-high stretch is along a vertigo-inducing narrow ledge.

Climbing the three stages of the charming Emerald Pools walk is not such a tall order, but expect to share the paths with many others. Carry on to the sizeable Upper Pool, backed by an enfolding cradle of vertiginous walls. Go in the morning for sunlit photos.

Recommended place to stay

■ Zion Lodge

☎ 001 303 297 2757

🌐 www.zionlodge.com

Go for a cosy cabin at this eco-friendly bolthole with views of sheer canyon walls and grazing mule deer. **\$176 (£110)**



Bryce Canyon National Park

While the Grand Canyon lies at the bottom of a series of stepped plateaux called the Grand Staircase, Bryce Canyon stands near the top. Named after a 19th-century Mormon who stuck it out here for five years, Bryce is a series of amphitheatres where the audience and stars are thousands of beguiling limestone and dolomite hoodoos. Native Paiute legend says these eroded columns perched on soaring pedestals are people turned to stone by the Coyote god. Ranger talks provide the geological reality, but it's easy to imagine them as anthropomorphic statues; one uncannily resembles Queen Victoria!

**FREE
ranger
talks**

Year-round, visitors can drive the 29km stretch along the rim up to Rainbow Point, 2800 metres above sea level. On the way back, stop off at viewpoints such as the salmon-pink arch of Natural Bridge and the castle-like pinnacle clusters at Farview Point. The most sublime vista is over gargantuan Bryce Amphitheater, best seen from Bryce or Inspiration Points. Paria View is a nice option for sunset. In spring and autumn, expect sub-zero temperatures at night and perhaps snow by day.

Recommended walks

On the Navajo Loop Trail from Sunset Point, hikers descend steeply to the stone skyscrapers and narrow slot canyon of 'Wall Street'. Link the walk to the Queen's Garden Trail where you'll pass through a fairytale world of pink, mauve, orange and yellow pastels up to Sunrise Point. Include a detour to the less-visited, pine-studded Peek-A-Boo Loop Trail, where every turn reveals a new awe-inspiring vision, such as hoodoo triptychs and the Wall of Windows.

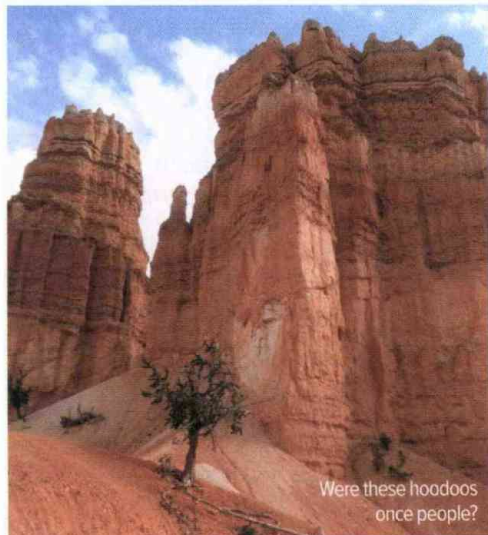
Recommended place to stay

■ **The Lodge at Bryce Canyon**

☎ 001 877 386 4383

🌐 <http://foreverlodging.com/brycecanyon>

Charming log cabins and spacious, plain hotel rooms in a pine forest near the rim. **\$184 (£115)**



Were these hoodoos
once people?

Other highlights

If you're taking the Grand Circle route, there are some other great sites worth visiting.

Antelope Canyon

Take a break from giant chasms and get close to a slender, photogenic gem near the town of Page. There are two flood-sculpted slot canyons on land owned by the Navajo Nation. Most people visit Upper Antelope Canyon and explore a warren of swirling walls lit up in varied tints of orange by chinks of daylight.

We found the even narrower Lower Canyon less crowded and more interesting. Go mid-morning for the best light. For either canyon you don't need to pre-book, but a guided tour is obligatory (cash only).

Coral Pink Sand Dunes

Imagine you're in the Sahara as you walk over the sweeping shrub-topped dunes in this state park near Kanab. If you stay to snap the rich colours at sunset, watch out for animals crossing the unlit road as you leave.

Glen Canyon Recreation Area

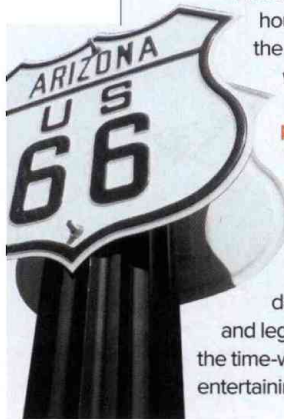
At prosaic Page, the mighty Glen Canyon Dam has been generating power and storing the Colorado's water since the 1960s. A tour whisks you through the 216 metre-high dam, while one of the world's highest steel arch bridges offers a fine dam view over to Lake Powell.

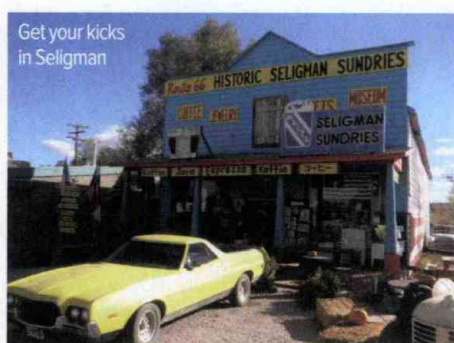
Hoover Dam

Slightly taller and older than Glen Canyon Dam, the monumental Hoover Dam straddles the Nevada/Arizona border. Allow three hours to take a dam tour, explore the informative visitor centre and walk across the top.

Route 66

Sixty miles south of the South Rim, Williams was the last town on the original Route 66 to be bypassed by the Interstate Highway. It relives the glory days with cadillacs on the streets and leg-jangling Elvis clocks on sale at the time-warp Twisters café. There's more entertaining kitsch at Seligman, where





Get your kicks
in Selligman

people cruise in on Harleys to the madcap Snow Cap café and buy Route 66 Beer (root beer, naturally) and humorous car plates. Get in the spirit by driving on Route 66 to Kingman through vast cattle country, beside mile-long freight trains.

Snow Canyon

A variety of short scenic trails makes this state park a worthy detour between Vegas and Zion. Walk past basalt lava flows and caverns, and onto the swirling layers of petrified sand dunes. The nearby city of St George has an appealing historic centre and Utah's oldest Mormon temple.

Travel essentials

How to make the most of your trip

ENTRY

All British citizens travelling to the USA must register for an ESTA before leaving the UK to qualify for a visa waiver. Apply online for free at <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov>

GETTING THERE

There are direct daily flights from London to Las Vegas with British Airways (Heathrow) and Virgin Atlantic (Gatwick), taking 10-11 hours.

TIME ZONES

While Arizona and Utah are on Mountain Standard Time (GMT-7), Nevada is on Pacific Standard Time (GMT-8). Nevada and Utah observe daylight saving from spring to autumn, but Arizona doesn't. So April to October, when it's noon in the UK, it is 5am in Arizona and Nevada, and 6am in Utah.

USEFUL WEBSITES

Arizona Tourism www.arizonaguide.com,
Grand Canyon National Park www.nps.gov/
GRCA, Utah Tourism www.utah.travel



WHICH? HOLIDAY FACTFILE

For more info on these USA canyons, see our Factfile www.which.co.uk/holiday

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALAMY, GETTY IMAGES, JONATHAN MITCHAM. PHOTOLIBRARY MAP ANN THOMSON
WE VISITED THE USA CANYONS IN OCTOBER 2009

